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Exploratory Study Investigating the Opinions of Russian-Speaking Parents on Maintaining their Children's Use of the Russian Language

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Abstract
This study explored why and how Russian speaking parents in an Irish context maintained the Russian language in their school-age children. Using a self-administered unstandardised questionnaire, the opinions of 16 Russian-speaking parents, reporting on 24 children, were surveyed. Of this sample, five parents were then interviewed using focus group methodology. The main findings revealed that Russian-speaking parents living in Ireland strongly supported Russian language maintenance in their families and wanted their children to be as fluent as possible in the Russian language. The reasons for the support of Russian language were: cultural preservation, general knowledge of languages in addition to English, and communication with the homeland. Methods employed to maintain the Russian language included conversing with children through Russian, reading and watching Russian TV/DVD. Although most parents spoke only Russian to their children, just three children were considered by their parents to have sufficient language skills to interact through Russian in Russian speaking countries. Interestingly, 15 children were thought to have adequate skills in Russian to speak with those outside their immediate family when in Ireland. Congruent with other studies of bilingualism, development of English, or the secondary, majority language, was also important to parents, as they lived in a dominant English-speaking society.

Keywords: language maintenance, Russian language, parents' opinions.

Introduction

Contemporary Ireland is a multicultural society. The steady influx of immigration from all over the world has ensured Ireland's status as a multi-ethnic country. In 2006 approximately 12.5% (465,330) of the population of Ireland were non-Irish (Central Statistics Office, 2007). Over the last decade, there has been an upward shift in the numbers of migrant workers and asylum seekers from the Eastern European region (Garner, 2004). The period 1996 to 2002 saw a 55.3% increase in the number of work permits issued to migrants from the former Eastern Bloc countries in Europe. By 2002, this region of Europe was amongst the

top five countries providing migrant workers and asylum seekers to Ireland (Garner, 2004). A total of 24,628 Lithuanian nationals and 13,319 Latvian nationals were living in Ireland in 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2008) and many of these spoke Russian as their primary language.

As part of moving to a different culture, members of linguistic minorities have been found to go through the process of acculturation – from marginalisation to integration – in order to become fully functional members of the dominant society (Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 2002). A practical problem for migrants in moving to a new country is how to integrate with majority culture without losing their own cultural heritage and language (Ng, 2007). Studies have found that children of cultural minority groups generally acculturate at a faster pace than their parents (Birman & Trickett, 2001) so there is often disharmony between the parents' maintenance of traditional ethnic values and culture and their children's experiences of the host country's culture (Kwak, 2003). Although parent-child acculturation differences are not inevitable – not all immigrant parents zealously advocate their ethnic culture and not all their children elect to quickly reject this (Chun & Akutsu, 2003) – in moving to a new country individuals must find a balance between adopting the host's culture and retaining features of the original ethnic culture (Costigan & Daphne, 2006).

Part of the acculturation process involves learning the language of the host country (Ng, 2007). While the acquisition of a secondary, majority language may be an essential part of integrating into the host country's culture, studies of Hispanic and Vietnamese minorities in the US showed that maintenance of the primary, minority language is also very much valued by linguistic minorities (Craig, 1996; Young & Tran, 1999). Irrespective of their ethnic and social background, these non-English speaking minorities considered maintenance of the primary language in their children as essential to their cultural identity and ethnic pride. Although the first generation of minority groups may work hard to maintain their mother-tongue, studies have found that the day-to-day language of choice for subsequent generations is the dominant language of the culture in which they are immersed (Slavik, 2001). Several factors have been found important to primary language maintenance. Bradley (2002) claimed that the attitude of the linguistic minority towards their language is crucial and found parents of children of linguistic minorities to display dominant positive attitudes towards bilingualism and bilingual education. Burck (2005) placed great importance on achieving the right balance between speaking the majority, secondary language and the primary language. She found that the primary language was more easily lost when the bilingual individual chose to, or was required to, predominantly speak the secondary language. Additionally, social interaction is a prominent contributor to language maintenance. According to Bradley when the range of social circumstances in which the primary language is spoken is broad, particularly if open to non-family outside speakers of the same language, ongoing maintenance of that language is more likely guaranteed and any potential language loss delayed.

While language maintenance may depend on the use of the primary language within the minority community and the transmission of language values from parent to child, Bradshaw (2006) believed that the education system could support this through its language instruction programmes. Other studies have found that for the primary language to be properly maintained children must learn more than the household vernacular; they need to learn the academic language such as is typically taught in schools (Cummins, 1994; Schiff-Myers, 1992; Wong Fillmore, 1991). For instance, Winsler, Diaz, Espinoza and Rodriguez (1999) found that attendance at a bilingual preschool supported the development of the primary language.

Common bilingual behaviours are code switching (the alternate use of languages between sentences) and code-mixing (the alternate use of languages within a sentence) (Guiberson, Barrett, Jancosek & Yoshinaga Itano, 2006). The ideal bilingual is defined as a person who is able to switch from one language to another according to linguistic circumstances but not within the same conversation or sentence. Some believe that this ideal bilingual situation is said to assist bilingual acquisition whereas code-switching (that is, mixing languages in the same speech situations) prevents successful language acquisition (Ochs & Schiefelin, 2006) resulting in language deficiency (Cheng & Butler, 1989). Others consider code-switching to be a typical behaviour that occurs at all stages of language development (Backus, 1999; Brice & Andersen, 1999).

In Ireland, the opportunities to maintain primary minority languages formally within the secondary level education system are limited to a selection of ten modern languages (including English and Irish) that can be taken as Leaving Certificate examinations (though not necessarily taught in the schools). Russian has been included in this subject list since 2003 (Department of Education and Science, 2006). At primary level, a government initiative to introduce modern European languages into the curriculum was described as popular among students (Coady, 2001). Currently there are 394 primary schools across the country participating in this initiative; unfortunately the languages offered are limited to Italian, Spanish, German and French (National Development Plan, 2000-06).

Despite the increase in linguistic minorities in Ireland in the last decade, and the large number of Russian speakers amongst these, there has been very little research exploring their views on the maintenance of their primary language and its contribution to the preservation of their cultural identity in Ireland. This exploratory study, conducted within the Irish context, set out to investigate the opinions of parents, who, like those in the literature, attributed importance to maintaining their primary language in their children. How and why they might achieve this, as well as other issues of relevance, were explored.

Methodology

Introduction

The aim of the study was to explore Russian speaking parents' views on maintaining their mother tongue in their children; including how and why they hoped to do this. Given the dearth of previous Irish-based research, the study was viewed and designed as exploratory in nature and conducted with the aim of informing future related studies in the Irish context.

The study employed a non-experimental, mixed-method design, which used a self-administered questionnaire as a quantitative measure of data collection followed by a focus group as a qualitative measure. These were chosen to reinforce each others' strengths by triangulation of method – the questionnaire provided an overview of respondents' opinions while the focus group interview enriched this data allowing for further exploration of the study topic.

Description of measures

Originally compiled in English and then translated into Russian by a native Russian speaker, many of the questions on the 13-item questionnaire were constructed on four, five or six-point Likert scales to provide information on a range of strengths of opinions. This type of question scale is one of the most used and direct methods of measuring attitudes/opinions (Hayes, 2000). The questionnaire collected information on the following:

- Demographic information on the children, including age, gender, school level.
- Parents' perceptions of the importance of Russian and other languages.
- Parents' reasons to maintain the primary language.
- Parents' strategies to encourage the maintenance of the desired language.

The focus group, conducted post-survey to further explore its main themes, involved a semi-structured group discussion facilitated, through Russian, by the primary researcher. In addition to the issues of why and how parents maintained their children's Russian language, topics discussed were: parents' opinions of different levels of Russian between siblings, children's language preferences and children's ease of cultural assimilation.

Preparatory Work

All written information related to the study (participant information leaflet, questionnaire, consent form) was translated from English into Russian by a native Russian speaker known to the principal investigator. The native speaker also assisted with focus group data collection. Following translation, the questionnaire and focus group interview schedule were piloted on two Russian speaking parents living in Ireland, who did not take part in the study otherwise. Recommendations on language relevance, content and order of questions, and interview technique were accepted and incorporated into the data collection measures.

The Sample

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a sample of convenience was accessed. Parents, whose primary language was Russian and whose children (all under 18 years) attended a Russian-speaking language school, comprised the study sample. The questionnaire was distributed to one parent of each child attending the Russian language school (N=20 parents). The survey response rate was 80% making a sample size of 16 parents. These parents reported on a total of 24 children. Additionally, five of the surveyed parents participated in the subsequent focus group interview. To compensate for the study's limited sample in terms of size and heterogeneity the study made every effort to introduce methodological rigour in line with Krefting's (1991) recommendations on truth value, consistency, applicability and neutrality of the study.

The Language School

The language school is supported by the Russian Orthodox Church with the sole purpose of developing and maintaining the primary language of children of Russian-speaking origin. It takes place twice per week from 9.00 to 13.00 each Saturday and Sunday. The language school teachers, who are professionally trained to teach the elementary (primary) and secondary school curriculum, speak only Russian with the children. This is the only school in Ireland that teaches Russian following the education curriculum in Russia (Naumov, 2008), which at the elementary stage of education includes Russian Language, Literature and Reading; and Russian Language and Literature at the secondary stage (Russia InfoCentre, 2006). Other subjects in the school include Geography, History and French. In 2008, 75 students were enrolled at the language school and in May 2007, 13 students were its first graduates (Naumov, 2008).

Data Collection

Having gained permission from the language school principal to access the sample population, all parents of children attending the school were invited to a presentation to introduce and explain the study. At this point written information on the study, together with questionnaires and focus groups consent forms, were distributed to all in attendance (N=20). Parents were encouraged to contact the researcher over the following week with any queries they had about the study and to take this time to consider their participation in the study. Sixteen questionnaires were returned anonymously to a sealed box in the language school. Parents interested in participating in the focus group also returned their contact details to this box but on a separate page to maintain anonymity of the questionnaire. The focus group, consisting of five parents who were native Russian speakers, was audiotaped and held in a private room in the school. It was facilitated, through Russian, by the primary researcher who used a native Russian speaker to take additional field notes. It lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Methodological Rigour

The following measures were undertaken to enhance credibility of the study's results generally and address reliability and validity issues in the self-designed questionnaire: a thorough description of the study design to support generalisation and external validity; the use of a representative sample of questions and piloting to aid content validity (recommended by Peat, 2002); and the triangulation of method using qualitative and quantitative measures to improve construct validity (Batavia, 2001).

Focus group rigour was ensured by coding and recoding of qualitative data and reflexivity on behalf of the primary researcher. The study allowed for the researcher to be both an interactive observer (data collection through focus group) and independent from participation (data collection through questionnaire). Thus, the use of both a holistic perspective and number-focused research (that is, dynamic and fixed research designs) also enhanced rigour.

After both sets of data were translated and transcribed by the researcher they were additionally checked for accuracy of translation and transcription by two native Russian speakers, which enhanced the linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance and thus sensitivity of measures. Additionally one of these Russian speakers was present at the focus group as a second coder to overview the interactions and to ensure data was collected and recorded accurately.

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health Science Research Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed of their rights as participants of this study and were made aware of the concepts of confidentiality and consent. Written consent forms were signed prior to conducting the focus groups.

Data analysis

Survey data was coded and input into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 12.0.1. Prior to analysis input data was examined for errors. Given the small sample size, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Microsoft Excel was used to visually represent findings.

Audiotaped qualitative data from the focus group interview was transcribed verbatim and checked against field notes. The qualitative data analysis programme, N6, was employed to organise and analyse the information. Coding of data was reviewed by an external person. Following discussion emergent themes were decided.

By using both methods of data collection, data analysis produced different levels of understanding and explanation of parents' opinions of their children's maintenance of Russian.

Limitations

There was a potential for sampling bias due to non-randomised selection of the study's sample. This was a consideration in the handling of the quantitative data collected through survey as it has a negative effect on generalisability of results to the population. However, the effect of this limitation was reduced by being clear about the inclusion criteria that described the sample and not extrapolating beyond this (Hayes, 2000). Although the survey sample size was small, it produced a high response rate, indicating little non-response bias. The addition of the qualitative focus group information, with its required alternative data analysis method, further added to the volume of data and depth of results. The above strategies reduced bias and increased trustworthiness and generalisability of the study (Berg & Latin, 2004).

The following section describes the study's findings. As both qualitative and quantitative measures addressed the same issues, findings are presented together under five main headings.

Results

Following individual analysis the results of both questionnaire and focus group have been combined in this section to provide a coherent account of the parents' opinions. However, it is made clear throughout from which source the information came.

Description of Sample

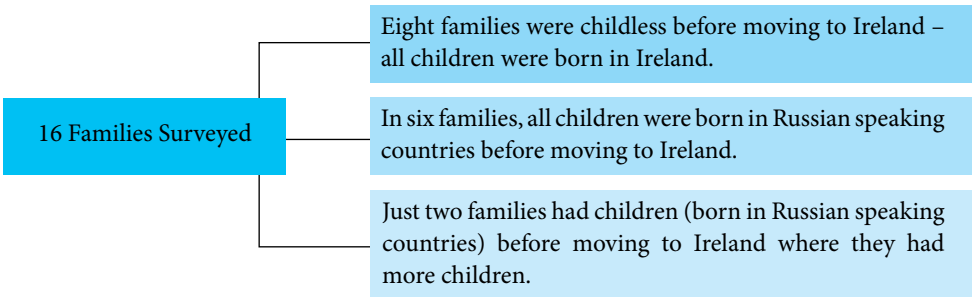
The questionnaire respondents were 16 Russian-speaking parents who together reported on 24 children in total (17 boys and seven girls). Twenty one of these attended primary school and were aged between five to 11 years. The remaining three children were aged between 12 and 16 years and attending secondary school.

Of the 16 families in the study, half had only one child. There were seven families with two children and only one with three children.

All 24 children spoke both Russian and English. Fourteen children were learning Irish in school and three of these were learning up to two extra languages in school in addition to Irish and English. Parents spoke English as a second language, most, though not all, at a basic level.

The length of time the families lived in Ireland varied from three to 10.5 years, with an average length of just under seven years. Of the 24 children, half were born in Ireland. The following figure (Fig. 1) outlines where children were born as a function of the family.

Figure 1: The countries in which families had their children – Ireland versus Russian speaking countries



Parents in the focus group were represented by three parents from three families and two parents from the same family, reporting on seven children (six of these were from two sibling families and one was a lone child; and four of the children were born in Ireland).

Status of Russian Language in Families

Despite a number of families originally hailing from Slavonic countries other than Russia, questionnaire respondents reported that all parents spoke Russian with their children and 23 of the children spoke Russian with their parents (one did not answer this question). Just three children were considered by their parents, in their questionnaire responses, to have sufficient skill to use Russian in Russian-speaking countries. Fifteen were able to communicate with other native Russian speakers (friends and relatives) within the Irish context while eight children spoke Russian within the immediate family only (that is, with parents and siblings).

Exploring children's use of Russian further with focus group participants (who were reporting on seven children) showed that their children tended to move between Russian and English languages quite freely, often mid-conversation, depending on whom they were talking to, but at all times exhibiting an obvious preference for speaking English. Parents claimed to observe children language switching particularly when the use of Russian was not essential, for example when those with limited English proficiency (including parents) were not present and when there was a choice of language available (when interacting with bilinguals). One participant claimed that her children spoke Russian "only with those who have bad English; they only speak Russian because they have to". Another stated that "when playing [her children] begin to switch to English" – she claimed that her children preferred to speak English with each other although they always spoke Russian to their parents. Only two children of the focus group parents used Russian by preference in the language school

environment; the other children would all rather, it was felt, speak English, even in this Russian orientated environment. A focus group parent described how her son had attended the Russian language school for "the whole year, won't anymore… doesn't show any interest, he didn't understand anything anyway, so all in vain". This parent went on to say that "…it seems that English is superseding Russian." She gave an example of her children attempting to translate Russian sayings from Russian cartoons into English: "Even these… expressions they are already trying to translate from Russian to English".

While all focus group parents considered their children to be fluent English speakers, four also perceived their children to be fluent for their age in spoken Russian (the fifth focus group parent commented as above on her son's difficulties in the language school). However, the focus group parents also recognised that certain aspects of the language, for example spoken language, were more developed than others, such as written language. The majority of the questionnaire parents (11 out of 16) seemed doubtful that Leaving Certificate level Russian would be achieved by their children and just five parents were confident their children would actually take the Leaving Certificate Russian exam. Three of the focus group parents specifically attributed their children's failure to develop their Russian language skills to the lack of available tuition in Russian and all focus group parents were unanimous in their support for the introduction of Russian as a secondary school curricular option. Those questionnaire respondents who believed their children would take Leaving Certificate Russian thought their children might do so for the benefit of their future career options.

Language differences within families

Parents in the focus group reported that there were often great differences in the level of Russian language competency between siblings. Those with at least one child born outside Ireland and another in Ireland believed that their children's Russian language competency was related to the country in which their children's early language had developed. If the child moved to Ireland, having previously lived in a Russian-speaking country where s/he had attended school, they felt the child's Russian was at a higher competency level than that of their sibling or friends born in Ireland.

These parents also attribute differences between siblings' levels of language competency to different levels of parental investment in teaching Russian to their children as they grew up. One focus group parent explained that she "spent more time" with her older daughter, "working on her Russian". She went on to say that her older daughter "tells more fairytales, knows more poems, speaks better, whereas [her younger son] got it harder, he's better off in English". With regards to age-related differences between siblings, the converse was also true – the following parent explained that her younger child had better Russian than the older.

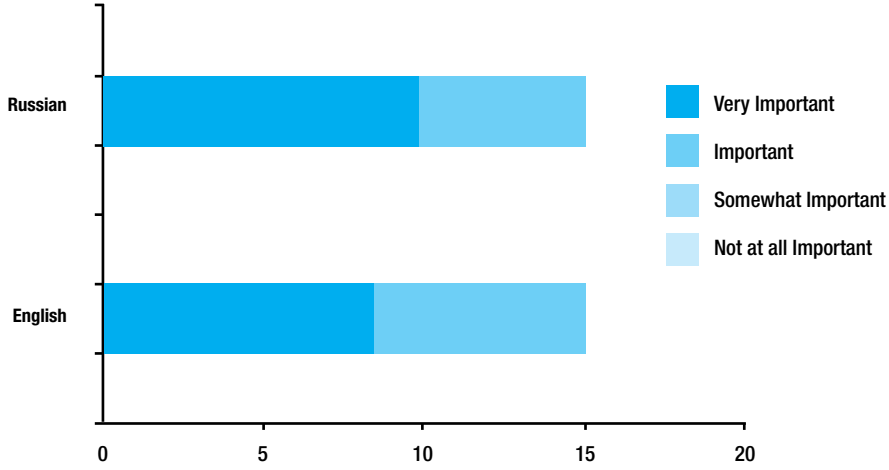
> "My eldest [son] is 15, it's already easier for him in English than in Russian. The youngest in our family speaks fluent Russian, loves Russian cartoons, but the oldest doesn't understand Russian films anymore … he reads, but doesn't get the expressions at all, what they mean."

In this parent's opinion, as her son grew older his English improved while his Russian disimproved.

Importance of, and reasons for, maintaining Russian

Questionnaire participants described the importance of their children having fluent Russian and English on a scale of one to four (from 'not at all important' to 'very important'). It was found that while having fluency in Russian was 'very important' to eight parents, these same parents also held the English language in equal importance. The following figure (Fig. 2) shows how parents rated language fluency. No parent rated the acquisition of either Russian or English as unimportant. All of the focus group participants thought it important for them that their children speak Russian fluently.

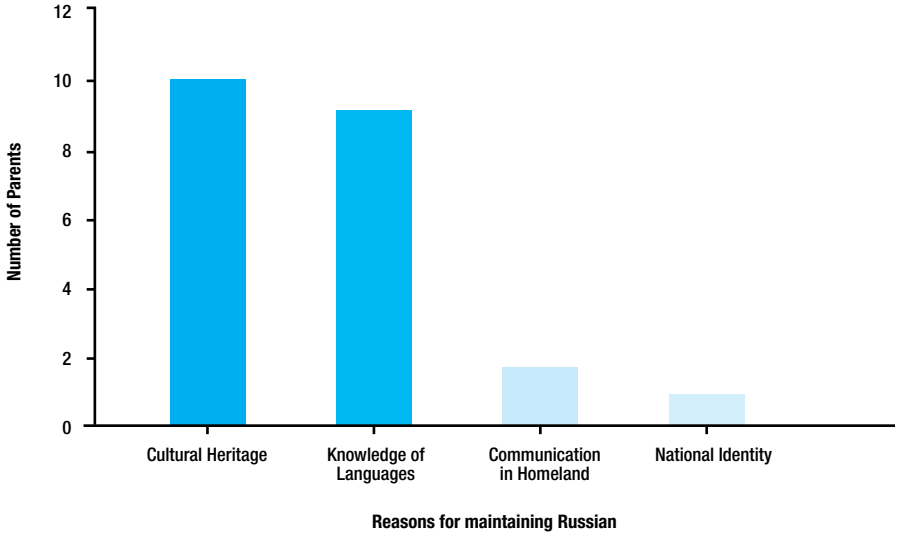
Figure 2: Importance parents attributed to having fluency in English and Russian languages (n=15 as one parent did not answer this question).



Questionnaire respondents were asked to identify the main reason they might value their children's maintenance of Russian and were given four answer options, including an 'other' option, to do this. The protection or preservation of their 'cultural heritage' and the 'knowledge of languages' were the key reasons for valuing the acquisition and maintenance

of the Russian language in their children. Two parents provided an additional reason for maintaining their children's language skills – they valued competency in Russian so that their children might communicate with those in their homeland. Several respondents identified more than one main reason for maintaining their children's Russian so the responses (see Fig. 3) are greater in number than the total sample of 16 parents. These reasons were again echoed in the focus group discussion where one parent spoke about wanting his children to take pride in their heritage and culture, noting, for instance that "there is Russian soul in Russian cartoons, [we] grew up with them, and, it's in our children. And of course [we] would want them to grow up like this, with soul".

Figure 3: Parents' reasons for importance of maintenance of Russian



While all parents were keen to maintain their primary language in their children, not all children were similarly focused. One focus group parent explained that

> "They don't want to learn. I mean, all they want is to play or do nothing. [To maintain Russian it] becomes necessary to work very hard, of course … Sometimes there just isn't enough moral strength … but [we, the parents] do our best to give our best effort so that we don't lose it …".

Another parent echoed this stating that "she [the daughter]…thinks she doesn't need it, that English and Irish is enough for her. I insist that she learns Russian and keeps it". Contrary to this, one parent remarked on her child's enthusiasm for learning Russian in the language school.

Strategies parents used to maintain their children's Russian language

All of the focus group participants agreed that they actively encouraged their children to speak Russian through using Russian in their interactions with their children. Of the 16 questionnaire respondents, 14 spoke Russian to their children at all times, and the remainder said they 'regularly' used Russian in their interactions with the children.

The most frequently used methods of maintaining Russian language, that were also cited as the most readily accessible by parents, were reading (reported by ten parents) and watching TV/DVDs/video games (reported by nine parents). Six parents also gave their children additional homework support or tuition. Other strategies used by focus group parents included: writing, listening to Russian songs and fairytales and learning Russian poems. Parents in the focus group felt the spoken aspect of Russian was more easily acquired by their children than the written, although one participant described the written aspect of the language as 'strengthening' the spoken language. Another stated "the written, it supports it all the same … it deepens it [the spoken] for those who already have it".

Not surprisingly, given the source of the sample, another method of maintaining the Russian language encouraged by all parents was their children's attendance at a weekend Russian-speaking language school run by the Russian Orthodox Church with the aim to teach, improve and maintain the Russian language among schoolchildren with parents of Russian-speaking origin. Focus group parents agreed that the language school made it possible for children to maintain their Russian language. One parent stated: "It's good that here there is this school, because if, say there wasn't, my child would hardly have any knowledge [of the language], and I could hardly make [the child] learn it, because it's difficult after all"; and that "when it's in school, it's easier to get them to learn it." While all of the parents highly valued the educational opportunities the school offered their children, focus group participants were aware of its limitations. Its weekend service, where children usually attend classes on either Saturday or Sunday, fell short when compared to time devoted to teaching and learning other languages within the Irish education system. As one parent said "of course, [this way of] learning Russian is not sufficient. I would ideally like to have it more often, more of it, and more often". They wished for more frequent Russian classes to match "the level in the Russian education system", which was "about five times more demanding".

Bearing in mind that their children's attendance at the language school was an indication that this was a sample of parents who were motivated to have their children learn and speak Russian, this study found that they valued and made efforts to ensure that their children learned and maintained the Russian language for a variety of reasons. However, their children, though all having some level of proficiency in Russian, were generally more inclined to converse in English, the language of the majority.

Discussion

In this study parents cited societal and practical aspects such as cultural heritage (the most frequent reason), national identity, and communication in the homeland and with Russian-speaking people, among other reasons, for maintaining the primary language, Russian, in their children. These findings were consistent with those of Craig (1996) whose participants, Spanish-speaking parents in the US, identified reasons such as ethnic pride in their cultural and linguistic roots, cultural maintenance and fear of heritage loss, and communication with family and other Hispanic people as motives for maintaining Spanish in their children. Measures taken by the Russian-speaking parents in this study to maintain their children's primary language skills, such as attending a Russian-speaking language school, were also comparable with the literature – Young and Tran (1999) found that Vietnamese parents in San Diego (US) used a Saturday language school run by the Vietnamese community for children to learn the language, culture and customs.

Although the majority of parents in this study, and in the literature (for example, Young and Tran, 1999), spoke only their primary language (in this case Russian) in the home environment, their children were reported to switch between Russian and English, at times mid-conversation, and at all times favouring the use of English. In this way the terms 'ideal bilingual' and its opposite, 'the bilingual who engages in code-switching', were found to be relevant to this study. As a practical concept, the ideal bilingual did not exist in terms of the natural, everyday interactions of these children. This finding was in keeping with that of an experimental study of German-Italian speaking families, which showed that code-switching was an inherent part of natural speech of bilinguals, regardless of age, language, or proficiency (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2006).

Support for maintaining the primary language by participants in this study was coupled with equally strong support for learning English and consistent with findings of other studies that indicated overall positive attitudes of parents of various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds towards bilingualism and bilingual education (Young & Tran 1999; Craig, 1996). The importance of proficiency in the majority language has already been recognised in the UK, where those applying for naturalisation as a British citizen, or indefinite leave to remain (settlement in the UK), must provide evidence of their skill in the English language by taking certain examinations and classes (Border and Immigration Agency, 2003). The Irish government has English language fluency as a core goal of its integration policy and hopes to make it one of the criteria for nationalisation in the future (Fanning & Munck, 2008). The Office of the Minister for Integration (2009) believes that learning and practicing English is very important to improve the quality of life, both socially and economically, for linguistic minorities living in Ireland. The value that the parents in this study placed on their children learning English demonstrated their understanding of its importance in the context of living in a predominantly English-speaking country.

However, the case for supporting language development should not be an either/or situation – in this case, either English or Russian. Instead, Cummins (2001) states that when promoted together, both languages enrich each other rather than subtract from each other, a claim supported by the work of Stagg Peterson and Heywood (2007). Certainly parents in the current study were of the opinion that both Russian and English language development was important for their children. Children who are able to maintain both languages may be better able to retain the values of their original culture, thus becoming bicultural – the most adaptive outcome for a linguistic minority (Romeo et al., 2004).

The focus group parents commented that it was easier to develop and maintain their children's Russian language when it was taught in school. These parents were also keen to promote the written as well as the oral language. The literature recommends, for true language maintenance, that children should learn their primary language formally, in the cognitive academic way that is typically taught in schools (Cummins, 1994; Schiff-Myers, 1992; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Bradshaw (2006) claimed that the maintenance of minority language requires commitment on several levels – that families have a role to play but so too do schools and other social institutions.

There was a notable difference between the proficiency with which children in this study spoke the majority language (English) and the limited competency of children of linguistic minorities in other studies, for example Lee (1999). Contrary to the children in the current study from Russian-speaking backgrounds, Deegan (2003) explained that the majority of children of linguistic minorities in the Irish school system have lower levels of English compared to their primary language. Indeed, the proficiency in English of the children in this study, commented on by focus group parents, may have contributed to their preference for speaking this language and not their primary language, Russian. This echoes Burck's (2005) finding that fluency in and use of the majority language can contribute to primary language loss. A principal cause of language loss is related to a change in the prestige of, and the regard with which, a language is held (Bradley, 2002). On the other hand, when a language and culture are welcomed and valued by a school it is thought to improve the sense of self and academic output of children from linguistic minorities (Cummins, 2001). It may be possible that the status of Russian – a language not taught in mainstream schools – for children in the current study was in decline.

Conclusion

The parents in this study were overwhelmingly in favour of supporting their children's Russian language development. However, many feared that their children's skills and/or motivation to maintain their mother-tongue were low. Given the strong link in the literature between primary language development and cultural heritage, ethnic pride, communal and personal identity, and the solid evidence for intergenerational language loss, these parents' interest in language maintenance and fear for its loss were both realistic and understandable

concerns. With high immigration from Eastern Europe where Russian is the primary language of many, there is a demand for some external support for bilingual programmes.

The parents in this study were deliberately recruited because of their interest in maintaining their primary language in their children, as evidenced by their children's attendance at the language school. Herein lay a potential difference between this sample and other Russian speaking parents living in Ireland who may not, in fact, value primary language maintenance. Access to a more diverse parent group in future research would allow researchers more fully appreciate how a more representative sample of Russian speaking parents think about maintenance of their primary language in their children.

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